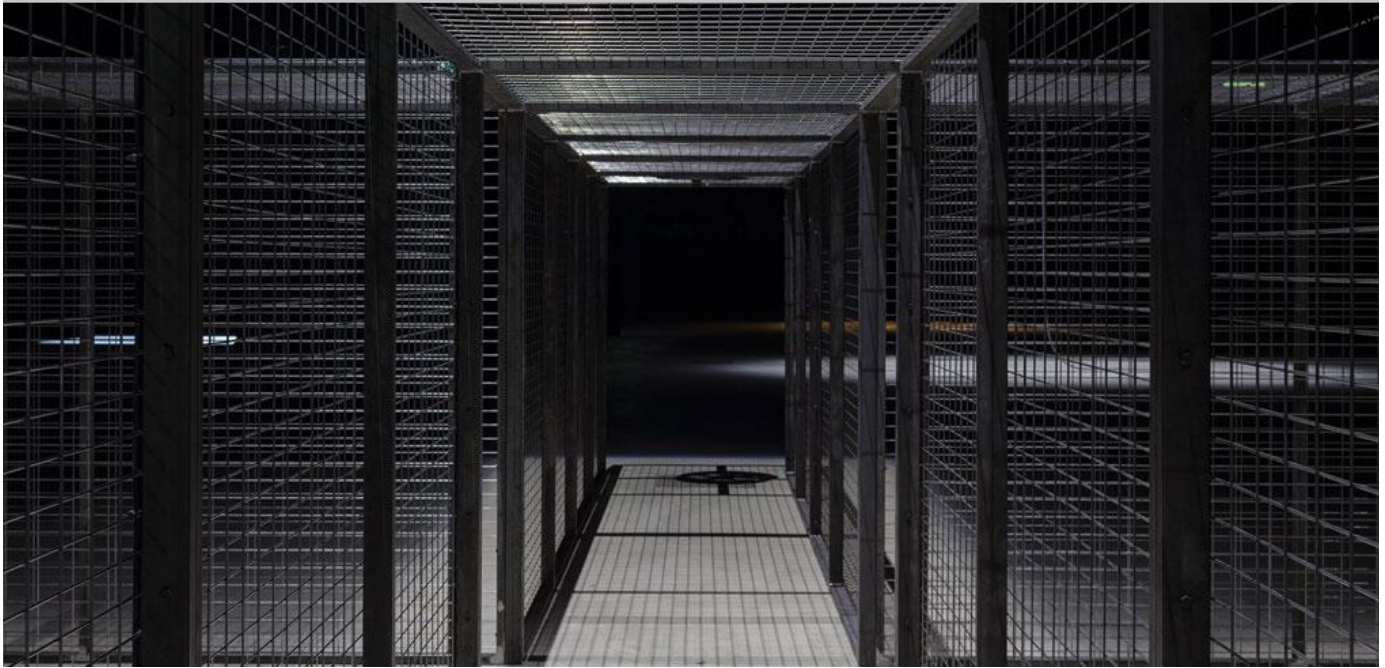


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REVIEW - 29 JUN 2017

# Miroslaw Balka

Pirelli HangarBicocca and Galleria  
Raffaella Cortese, Milan, Italy

BY FRANCESCA TAROCCO

Curated by Vicente Todolí, 'Crossover/s', Miroslaw Balka's

retrospective at Milan's Pirelli HangarBicocca, is his first in Italy. It occurs at the same time as a solo exhibition at Galleria Raffaella Cortese titled in German 'In Bezug auf die Zeit' (In Relation to Time). Drawing on the definition of acceleration in physics (velocity in relation to time), the show explores three decades of the artist's career through several key moments. 'Crossover/s' benefits from the immensity of Pirelli HangarBicocca's former industrial space, that concrete container that draws viewers into its dark cavity – immersing us in twilight, it alters our perception of the world. On display here are some of the largest pieces the artist has ever made and the exhibition inevitably overshadows that at Galleria Raffaella Cortese. But it is worth seeing both, for at Galleria Raffaella Cortese the work is intimate, less grandly resolved, making uncertainty a point of reflection. In both exhibitions, Balka returns to history, both collective and private, and to mourning, loss, disorientation and palpable menace: these are the experiences that his artworks reflect, both separately and together.

At Pirelli HangarBicocca, 15 works are displayed in the vast space. *Cruzamento* (2007), first conceived for the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro, is a large metal cage in the shape of a cross. Stepping inside the work, visitors are hit by strong winds produced by five fans blowing noisily away. This 'invisible shower' is, in Balka's own words, meant as a sort of cleansing: mourning and purification are recurring themes in the show. An intense smell wafts from *Soap Corridor* (1995) – an L-shaped structure whose inner walls are covered in soap – first conceived for the 1993 Venice Biennale. In *200 x 760 x 550 The Right Path* (2008-15), the black metal corridor leads visitors outside the exhibition



Miroslaw  
Balka, *The  
Skull*, 1989,  
concrete,  
steel, 27 x 17 x  
20 cm.  
Courtesy: the  
artist and  
Galleria  
Raffaella  
Cortese,  
Milano;  
photograph:  
Lorenzo  
Palmieri

space without  
their knowing.  
Plunged into  
total darkness,  
many walk  
with the tips of

their fingers touching the walls out of fear. In a corner, the small monitor screening the video *Primitive* (2008) makes for an intimate disruption amidst the larger installations. This is but a fragment of the long documentary film *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann, in which a Treblinka concentration camp guard, in reply to a question about conditions in the camp, incessantly repeats 'primitive, yes, primitive, yes'. The works touch us and we feel and touch (and sometimes even taste and smell) them back – and not only in a metaphorical sense. They affect our bodies, make us flinch and hold our breath. Indeed, their very intelligibility and meaningfulness depends upon our existence as embodied viewers.



Miroslaw  
Balka,  
'CROSSOVER/S',  
installation  
view, Pirelli  
HangarBicocca,  
Milan, 2017.  
Courtesy: the  
artist and  
Pirelli  
HangarBicocca,  
Milan;  
photograph:  
© Attilio  
Maranzano

In 'In Bezug auf die Zeit', the gallery space is sparsely occupied by three new works from 2017. These are based on the juxtaposition of materials and objects that have been in Balka's life for a long time, lying about in his garden, resting on his desk or dangling from the wall. A granite base holding a glass pipe filled with red wine, 250 x 14 x 13, evokes ideas around fragility and the passing of time. Also on view is a work from 1990, *Blue Wave*, for which Balka took a section of the wooden construction fence that surrounded the Warsaw Centre for Contemporary Art, laid it on the floor and poured salt into the cracks of the weathered planks. A miniature concrete skull at one hand obliquely references the perils of the sea: it's hard not to look at it and think of the Mediterranean sea where so many people have lost their lives in the hope of reaching



Europe. Salt has often been used in Balka's sculptures, both for its ordinariness and its beauty and conjuring references to taste, pain and cleaning open wounds. Balka's work seems to ask: How does humanity inhabit the world? How do we make sense of its precariousness, its injuries and enchantments? His work resonates in important ways with Kath Weston's recent book *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World* (2017), in which the writer turns her attention to changing conceptions of the human in the 21st century. As Weston writes, these new understandings 'literally reconceive humans as the products of an "environment" that has itself taken shape through embodied human action'.

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Miroslaw Balka, 24 x 30 x 32, 2017, terrazzo, plastic, 20 x 30 x 31 cm.

Courtesy: the artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano; photograph: Lorenzo Palmieri

Condemnation and remorse are beside the point for Balka, who asks instead that viewers consider the inevitability of bereavement and joy and what those look – and feel – like at present. Like his fellow Polish artist, the poet and essayist Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012), Balka keeps the act of mourning in process, unfinished, suspended. As Szymborska asks in her poem 'Elegiac Calculation': 'How many / (if the question makes sense, / if one can verify a final sum / without including oneself) / have sunk into that deepest sleep (if there's nothing deeper)'.

*Main image: Miroslaw Balka, Cruzamento (detail), 2007, installation view at Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and HangarBicocca, Milan; photograph: © Attilio Maranzano*

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